**Build Back Better Through Markets**

Last month political leaders from the North West including Manchester mayor Andy Burnham suggested that we should “build back better” following the current public health crisis with the aim of delivering locally a “cleaner, safer, stronger and crucially fairer” society. With this in mind we are writing today an open letter to the people of Manchester as well as those people in local government/business to support the region’s markets and market traders to ensure that in the first instance they survive but beyond that they are allowed to contribute to the “build back better” strategy by delivering the economic and social benefits that markets are capable of.

The current situation is that due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic the United Kingdom is very likely going to suffer from a recession leading to significant unemployment as well as a reduction in living standards across the board. At the same time the risk to public health is an ongoing concern for all individuals and businesses seeking to return to some form of normality which will quite rightly affect consumer and business owner confidence. The current advice suggests that outside spaces are a lower risk environment and as a result the demand for businesses to operate in outside spaces will increase. Markets are in a fairly unique position to be able to address both of these issues directly.

It is widely accepted that markets provide significant economic and social benefits including but not limited to:

* Offering huge opportunity to new businesses/entrepreneurs with low barriers to entry
* Providing environmentally sustainable models of retailing
* Generating funds for local councils to reinvest in communities
* Traditional markets supply basic/staple goods to people on lower incomes at an affordable price
* Act as platforms for community cohesion
* A market visit is a social experience providing interaction and a positive environment for many people in the community
* Attracting visitors from outside the local area providing a boost to local businesses
* Spending money at a local market means more money stays in the local economy
* Markets can operate in under utilised spaces

These economic and social benefits will be even more valuable whilst the region is recovering from the effects of the pandemic.

Sadly Manchester does not currently have the thriving market culture you would expect of such a major, international city and this is in large part down to the lack of support for market operators and traders.  All markets are licensed by Manchester Markets who also operate the council owned markets such as New Smithfield Market, The Arndale Market and the Christmas Markets. If you want to operate a market (with at least 5 stalls) then you need to apply to Manchester Markets and if your application is successful then an administration fee of £55 plus a license fee of £4.50 per stall per day is applicable. This is a significant cost to market operators who on the most part already work on small margins (especially for those operators who already pay business rates for the property where the market takes place). In return for their fees the market operator does not receive anything apart from the permission to operate and the profits from Manchester Markets (£160,000 in 2018) are paid to the council so it is to all intents and purposes a market tax.  Another point to consider is that Manchester Markets' policy is to avoid actively penalising those market operators in the area who fail to apply for a license. This means it is only those responsible market operators who apply for a license that are taxed and regulated. We feel that with a change of strategy and minimal re-investment of their profits Manchester Markets could do great things to support the market community of Manchester leading to increased economic and social benefits for the wider community at the same time as generating more income for the council further down the line.

To achieve the goal of creating a thriving market community in Manchester we are asking Manchester City Council and Manchester Markets to consider the following requests:

- An immediate significant reduction in market license fees for the next 12 months to a level that enables existing independent markets to continue operating.

- A pledge of support that going forward an open conversation will be had (including traders, operators and wider stakeholders) as to how we can not only ensure the survival of the market operators and traders that exist today but also create a community where markets can thrive and contribute to the social and economic rebuilding of the region.

- Following those conversations actions will be taken to ensure markets and market traders are provided with support to grow in return for the payment of their market license fees.

With all parties working together we are confident that we can build a first class support network for traders and operators that not only generates direct income for the council but also provides a well needed contribution to the social and economic health of the city. We hope one and all will support us in this effort.

Levenshulme Market and GRUB